

## Relief

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“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” -- Matthew 11:28-30

I have taken as my text some of Jesus’s most famous and comforting words because of the obvious question, is there anyone among us this morning who’s not feeling burdened?

During the best of times, all of us carry a variety of psychological, emotional, and spiritual burdens; in the hip parlance of today, we call it baggage. It comes from our personal histories, and it’s the shadow side of experience. Much of it we would prefer to keep to ourselves or to the one or two other people most directly affected by it. It’s almost always uncomfortable, sometimes it’s painful, occasionally it’s shameful, and it’s often puzzling. And until we can puzzle it out, we prefer to keep it to ourselves. Who wants to throw their mistakes out there for public consumption? We’d all like to be rid of it.

So Paul’s example in Romans should come to us as a kind of good news. It’s his confession of his own baggage that continues to distort his will: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (7:15). How many of us have said, at one point or another, something similar about ourselves?

“Why do I do this?” – as we find ourselves, yet again, jumping into a puddle of muddy emotions and actions that are going to leave us and perhaps others dripping with ick?

“Why do I do this?” – as we find ourselves, yet again, revving up our emotions and language for a good fight with a significant other?

“Why do I do this?” – as we find ourselves, yet again, clicking on the link that will take us to the bait that will set us off about this or that political issue?

“Why do I do this?” is the question anyone with even a hint of self-awareness asks, because we all do things we wish we hadn’t or wouldn’t or won’t. It’s the question of people who know better – or who *should* know better – and yet don’t do what they know.

Paul said it was because of sin: “But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me” (7:17). That’s dangerous language, and we need to tread carefully here, because while sin may be the source of sinful actions, the actions nonetheless remain ours, and we have to take responsibility for them. That’s not easy for us, and it never has been. We’ve always wanted to blame someone or something else for our shortcomings: our dysfunctional family, our prejudiced society, or the genetic hand we were dealt at birth.

And while all of those things are true – our dysfunctional families do provide us with faulty patterns of interacting with others, and our prejudiced society does perpetuate systemic isms that harm others, and our genes do predispose us to various problems and limitations – all

of that being true, we nonetheless have the responsibility to interact with all of those realities in such a way that we overcome evil with good, as Paul writes later in Romans (12:21). We have a responsibility to resist evil – resist taking the bait, resist giving in to provocation, resist responding in kind.

And just as Paul lamented the fact that he had an impulse in him to do what he knew he shouldn't do, he also knew that he had another impulse in him to do what he knew he should do. As a Pharisaic Jew, he had originally thought that that power was the law – that code of conduct that all Jews tried to live by – but he found that he couldn't do it.

Oh, he tried, of course, with a zeal that was the envy of people who believed as he did and the terror of those he opposed, like the followers of Jesus.

But then, in his famous about-face on his journey to Damascus, Paul came to see that the law couldn't do for him what he wanted it to do. The law could make him conscious of his sin, but it couldn't get him to quit sinning. It was a bit like the old joke we used to tell ourselves when I was growing up in the Baptist church: being Baptist wouldn't keep you from sinning, it would just keep you from enjoying it. That's the way the law worked for Paul: it made him conscious of his sin, but the law wasn't, for him, a sufficiently powerful ally to help him overcome that sin.

Paul needed a different ally, and he found it in Jesus the Christ: "But thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" he says at the end of this discussion of his inner conflict (7:25a). You and I tend to read past that phrase "our Lord," but let's pause a moment to take those words seriously, as Paul has given them to us.

To call Jesus the Christ our Lord is to give the Christ – the Word of God incarnate – top place in that hierarchy of values I spoke to you about recently. It is to surrender the false sense of control we all carry around with us through life, which may be our chief burden and the source of many of our other burdens. It is to put the Word of God in the driver's seat of our lives, the Word of God lived out in real time and real space in real people with real members, to use Paul's language. If we allow Jesus the Christ who is the Word of God in human form to be the lord of our life, we have power that we don't otherwise have. We have a new boss. We're open, to use the language I used last week, under new management.

That's why Paul thanks God for it. The lordship of the Word made flesh is a divine gift that allows us to help ourselves out of ourselves – our messes, our missteps, our screw-ups – in short, our sin. When we make the Word in human form the center of our lives, our lives inevitably change for the better, not just for the world, but for us as well.

I think Paul was experiencing what Jesus meant when he told us that his yoke is easy, and his burden is light. Yoking ourselves to the Word of God made flesh is to unite ourselves to a power beyond ourselves – beyond our politics, beyond our economics, beyond our crabby boss, beyond our worries, beyond our daily grind, even beyond a pandemic that continues to commandeer our attention.

This is what genuine spirituality is, friends. Spirituality is not like eye color or cleverness, something that belongs to us or something that we generate. Spirituality is a process of engagement – a repeated process of serious engagement with serious power about serious matters. When you say the word "God," you're getting serious. That's why the poet Philip Larkin called the church, "a serious house on serious earth." In this house – whether it's at Richmond Road or online – we get down to the business of serious engagement with God and

serious engagement with living – in this life and in any life to come. That’s genuine spirituality.

And that’s what Jesus is inviting us to in those words from Matthew’s gospel that I’ve taken as my text: it’s the original form of Christian spirituality: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (11:29).

We find rest – we find relief – when we yoke ourselves to the Christ. From the Christ we learn to distinguish what matters most from what matters least. From the Christ we learn what the world looks like from another person’s perspective – and another person’s perspective and another person’s perspective. From the Christ we learn how to listen to that still small voice that spoke to Elijah after the tumult and the storm. From the Christ, the Word made flesh, we discover the intrinsic value of the sparrows that fall to the ground and the lilies that neither toil nor spin.

When we yoke ourselves to Jesus the Christ, far from being burdened, we are actually freed, freed from our own, self-imposed burdens: burdens of worry and grief and regret and confusion and anger and uncertainty. The burdens of our own thoughts, our own reputations, and our own mistakes. The burdens of family, friends, associates, and country. Those are our burdens, that we have placed on our own hearts and minds, out of a mistaken sense of duty and responsibility.

Our only duty, as Christians, is to yoke ourselves to God through Jesus the Christ, God’s love made real in time and space, and to work in partnership with that divine love. That’s our real work and our real calling. And if we attend to that calling – daily and seriously – the other work that God has given us to do in our time and in our place will fall into their proper places.

Yes, we still have to work – we live outside of Eden, after all – but we’ll be able to do that work with healthy souls and nourished spirits. There will be neither anger nor bitterness, neither grief nor despair. The work of justice, the work of reconciliation, the work of repairing the damaged web of creation – it is possible to do that work with joyful hearts and nimble spirits. And everyone in the workplace knows that we work better when we work happy.

Yesterday we celebrated our country’s 244<sup>th</sup> year of independence, and we hope and pray that we will celebrate many more. If we don’t, it won’t be because of our enemies from “over there,” where we continually take wars. No, if this experiment in democracy comes to a premature end, it will be because of our stiff-necked egotism, willfulness, and manufactured discontent that characterized Jesus’s generation: “To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn’” (11:16-17). Jesus went on to reproach the cities in which his ministry began so spectacularly because they refused to accept the gift of new life, even though they had witnessed first-hand God’s miraculous power in their midst. They wanted to yoke God to themselves rather than the other way around; isn’t that what we all do when we become blind to our own sin?

We hear so much about the “secret” of happiness, but’s there’s nothing at all secret about it. It’s right there in the gospel of Matthew, where it’s been for about two thousand years. The secret of an unburdened life is to yoke that life to the undying life of Jesus the Christ, God’s Word made flesh, our crucified and risen savior. Join your life to that love that transcends all other loves and transcends even time and space. Unite your life to reality at its deepest, and you’ll feel the difference. It’s a promise Jesus made and it’s a promise I believe. I

hope you do, too.